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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: CHURCH AND STATE, MAINTAINING A DELICATE BALANCE

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Georgian Government officials are privately expressing frustration over the expansive role the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) plays in society. The long-hidden conflict between the GOC and GOG may be beginning to play out publicly in subtle ways. Internet videos mocking GOC Patriarch Ilia II were posted on the Facebook page of a Liberty Institute staff member causing speculation that the videos were a first step in a GoG campaign to quell the GOC's power. The videos sparked strong condemnation from the general public, and politicians from all sides rallied to the defense of the Patriarch. Publicly, President Saakashvili distanced himself from the scandal. Despite dubious evidence that any crime was committed, the prosecutor's office launched an investigation into the incident. The GOC blamed the videos on "hostile forces." Against the backdrop of this debate, radical fundamentalist orthodox groups are becoming more active in harassing non-Georgian Orthodox religious groups as well as Roman Catholic and Muslim congregations. The Patriarch's seeming inability to curb these groups actions may reflect political dissonance within the Patriarchate itself. It is widely rumored that the generally moderate Patriarch increasingly finds himself having to appease a more radical nationalistic faction which takes advantage of the Patriarch's age and declining health to increase its influence within the GOC. End Summary.

12. (C) Comment: Frustrated with the conservative, and at times anti-Western rhetoric of the church, some in the GOG seem to be moving to decrease the influence of the church. This power struggle between the GOG and the GOC is cloaked; however, in subtle innuendoes and privately confessed aggravations by GOG officials. As the backlash against the videos demonstrates, openly criticizing the Patriarch or the GOC brings immediate and emotional response from the population. Well aware of this fact, the GOG will not publicly criticize the GOC. Some secular-minded Georgians are genuinely afraid of this religious-nationalistic trend and what it might mean for future democratic reform, especially vis-a-vis church and state separation. The reaction to the video and how any legal cases, if brought in the courts, play out will provide a more public window into the political inviolability of the GOC and laws governing freedom of speech. End Comment.

SECULAR FRUSTRATION

13. (C) Beka Mindiashvili, head of religious and ethnic minority issues at the Public Defender's Office, in an October 5 article in the journal "Hot Chocolate" characterized the current mood of the GOC as "anti-liberal religious nationalism." This public statement against the GOC mirrors what we have been told privately by other young,

secularly-minded, and more progressive GOG officials. First Deputy Minister of Justice Tina Burjaliani told us that she could not understand the rise of the GOC's influence. Burjaliani said that just four to five years ago, after the Rose Revolution, Patriarch Ilia II and the GOC did not wield nearly as much power as they do now. Burjaliani lamented that the GOC's influence has halted democratic reforms such as religious equality under the law. Earlier attempts by the GOG, specifically by Minister of Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili, the one Jewish member of the Cabinet, to officially recognize other religious faiths as religions such as officially recognize other religious faiths as religions such have not come to fruition (ref C).

¶4. (C) New Public Defender Giorgi Tugushi was adamant in pronouncing religious and minority issues as one of his top priorities. He has vowed to follow the progress of stalled mosque construction and appeared outwardly angry about the GOC's involvement in what should be a purely secular process regarding the mosque's ownership and construction permits (ref B). At an Ambassadorial Working Group meeting October 26, Tugushi went even further, telling Ambassadors that sexual-orientation discrimination would also be a top priority for him, a policy which stands to put him in direct and open conflict with the GOC.

¶5. (C) On November 1, the Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) announced that they were launching an investigation into videos mocking the Patriarch although neither organization could specify which laws if any were broken. A consultant at the Parliamentary Legal Committee speculated that the Prosecutor's Office will file charges under the national defamation law. While this law

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does not refer to the Patriarch specifically, it protects the public from the use of defamation as a tool for political pressure. (Comment: Interestingly, no members of government have invoked this statute despite sometimes vociferous attacks on them personally. End Comment.) On November 3, Tugushi publicly stated that he has asked the prosecutor's office to disclose the article of the criminal code under which they were investigating citing his concern for protecting freedom of expression. By raising these obvious questions, Tugushi will likely find himself headed for another conflict with the GOC.

VIDEOS MOCKED - REACTIONS SPARKED

¶6. (C) The internet videos satirizing the Patriarch reportedly showed an animation of the Patriarch swearing and insulting President Saakashvili. The video was uploaded on YouTube on October 13, but only received national attention when it was shared on Facebook by Tea Tutberidze, regional coordinator for the Liberty Institute. The Georgian media then quickly picked up the story. The Liberty Institute is considered to be closely aligned with the government -- some of the president's closest advisors emerged from the think tank. Because of this, critics of the government have speculated that the videos were created and disseminated by some in the government as a tool to diminish the GOC's influence. As a point of reference regarding the political weight of the GOC, in an October International Republican Institute poll (ref A), the Georgian Orthodox Church garnered the most confidence from respondents as an institution at 93 percent versus 62 percent for the President's office.

¶7. (C) On October 20, in an attempt to distance Saakashvili himself from accusations, the President's Office released a written statement that "unethical expressions, intentionally or unintentionally, encourage the splitting of Georgian society." The statement acknowledged the Patriarch's popularity noting that the Patriarch "enjoys the huge support and respect of society and of the President...we will resort to any democratic means to protect his reputation and we will not let anyone misuse the principles of freedoms."

¶ 8. (C) On October 21 the GOC issued its own statement that "society and the parish of the Georgian Orthodox Church is insulted and wants answers." The Patriarchy's statement stressed that attempts to involve the clergy in public debates is part of a provocation plan by "hostile forces" and that they (the GOC) would not yield to such provocations. The GOC also called on the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) to allocate airtime for people chosen by the church to have the opportunity to answer the "wrongdoer's actions." Tutberidze put out a statement saying that the materials and comments on her Facebook page are hers alone and that she never intended to insult anyone's "personal or religious feelings." However, Tutberidze's states that she nevertheless considers it the right of any citizen, within the framework of the law, to express his/her viewpoint.

¶ 9. (C) The videos have evoked strong reactions from political leaders on all sides. At one press briefing, co-leader of the Conservative Party Zviad Dzidzguri demanded that the Liberty Institute be banned in Georgia like "anti-Semitic and fascist organizations are banned." Leader of the opposition political party Alliance for Georgia Irakli Alasania said that the reaction to the videos demonstrated it was impossible to harm the Patriarch's reputation with campaigns of this type. Leader of the Christian Democratic Movement Giorgi Targamadze said that the videos insulted not only the Patriarch, but the whole Georgian nation. The pro-opposition daily newspaper Akhali Taoba published an op-ed by Giorgi Udzilauri, a staff-writer, entitled "Insulting Patriarch May Trigger Revolution." The op-ed stated, that "financed by the U.S., this organization (the Liberty Institute) aimed from the very beginning to change the basic fundamentals of Georgian society, turning it into an American sterile, half-breed, and unprincipled mass to make it easy to rule." (Comment: The Liberty Institute does receive some funds from USAID as a sub-contractor of the United Nations Association of Georgia's "National Integration and Tolerance" program. End Comment.) The op-ed also makes the assertion that if attacks against the GOC continue that a revolution led by Orthodox leaders may be sparked.

THE RISE OF THE RADICALS

¶ 10. (C) Two radical fundamentalist Georgian Orthodox groups, the "Society of Saint David the Builder" and "Union of Orthodox Parents," have become more active recently -- stopping construction at a mosque, picketing at the gas stations of an Azerbaijani company, and distributing pamphlets on pedophilia in the Roman Catholic Church (ref B). On October 15 there was a large protest outside the Vatican

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Embassy. The security patrol said the protesters had banners that read: "We demand the Vatican Mission leave Georgia," "The Vatican is a spiritual aggressor," "Papists, stop trying to win over Orthodox Assyrians." Fr. Filippo Ciampanelli from the Apostolic Nunciature in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan confirmed to us that about 100 members from these two groups participated in the protest. Fr. Ciampanelli said; however, that the protest remained peaceful and those participating showed no signs of aggression.

¶ 11. (C) Fr. Ciampanelli said that the Patriarch is often in a position of having to placate this fundamentalist wing of the church, especially as he ages. It is possible that this nationalistic element within the GOC may be positioning itself into a position of predominance in preparation for the eventual succession of the Patriarch (ref d). Patriarchy Spokesman Davit Sharashenidze told us that these two particular groups are affiliated with the GOC, but they are not under its directive nor are they funded directly by the GOC. However, the group's members do include GOC clergy. Sharashenidze said that he was unsure why the groups would choose to stop the renovation of a mosque because they (the

GOC) had no problems with "traditional religions." (Comment:

The so-called traditional religions in Georgia are Armenian Apostolic, Georgian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Islam. Sharashenidze implied that the GOC has problems with the so-called "new religions" such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Baptists, etc. End Comment.) Sharashenidze said the one exception to the "traditional religions rule" was that the Turkish Government wanted to build a mosque in Batumi, where there is a large Adjarian Muslim population. In return, the Turks would restore Georgian Orthodox Churches in Turkey. For reasons he did not articulate, Sharashenidze felt that the building of a large mosque in Batumi was an unreasonable request.

BASS